

## Distraction Thieves



Citizens should remember that distraction crimes are committed by both men and women and they sometimes work in pairs. Generally, distraction thieves are professionals; well-dressed and well-spoken men and women who do their deeds mainly in retail businesses such as supermarkets and discount superstores, mall stores, hotel lobbies, car rental agencies, and airport terminals, among other places.

Crimes take place in both daytime and nighttime. Distraction thieves also pull their crimes outdoors in the daytime, in parking lots of businesses and banks; anywhere people would normally feel relatively safe. During daylight hours, good citizens are more likely to be trusting and helpful to others. Distraction thieves count on that trait.

### ***Perfect Targets for Thieves - Senior Citizens***

The reason distraction thieves focus mainly on senior citizens is because they are more trusting of strangers and less likely to engage in a physical altercation with a thief if he or she is caught in the act. Distraction thieves mainly target women because most carry handbags, which are easier to steal, and it's easier to take a wallet from a handbag than pick a man's pocket. In supermarkets and major discount stores, women tend to put their purses in shopping carts. Distraction thieves generally look for large handbags that are open at the top. Zipped handbags or those that have a snapped fold-over flap are usually avoided if the thief only wants a wallet. However, distraction thieves have been known to take the handbag if they can't get only the wallet. It only takes a matter of seconds for distraction thieves to get your handbag or purse and leave the area.

### ***How Thieves Operate Inside Stores***

One distraction thief approaches a likely target, always from an angle that forces the soon-to-be victim to turn away from her handbag in a shopping cart to address the stranger. The thief will ask the target a seemingly innocuous question; possibly for an opinion on a product, where a certain item can be located, or another question that will divert the victim's attention for a few seconds. During that amazingly short amount of time, the distracter's accomplice will dip into the target's handbag, remove the wallet, cell phone, checkbook, and anything else of value, and slip away. Most victims never see the accomplice, and by the time a victim realizes the loss, both thieves are long gone.

### ***How Thieves Operate in Parking Lots***

Again, remember that distraction thieves look for easy targets, such as a senior female carrying a handbag, even if the victim is with a companion. A distracter will usually approach the target and ask for some type of assistance. Female thieves have been known to feign an illness, pretend to need directions, or pretend to be looking for a lost child. Once a concerned victim is distracted, the accomplice will steal the victim's handbag. Sometimes, a thief will wait until the target gets into her car. Then the distracter will tell the victim that she has a flat tire or that someone has bumped her car. When the victim gets out to look at the problem, an accomplice will snag her purse from the front seat. Other distraction thieves plan ahead. They loiter in store parking lots watching for a likely target to park and go into a store. Then a thief will puncture a victim's tire and when the target returns, the thief (usually a male) will offer to help change the tire. Usually when the trunk lid is up, an accomplice will grab a handbag from inside the car and both thieves will quickly disappear.

### ***Distraction Thieves at Banks***

Like all criminals, distraction thieves know that banks are where people with money can be found. Remember, many thieves are professionals and they try to perfect what they do to make money and, more importantly, not get caught. Distraction thieves sometimes have a third accomplice when working in and around banks. One member of the group is inside the bank checking to see who receives a sizable amount of cash from a teller. The target might put the cash inside a handbag or bank bag. Then the inside man follows the chosen target from the bank to the parking lot, signaling an accomplice along the way. The distracter usually approaches the target at his or her vehicle, using a ruse to distract their attention. One distraction is the punctured tire scam.

A successful thief is one who can separate the target from his or her purse or bank bag. That's when the accomplice moves in to steal valuables. At one bank, a victim was getting into his car when a man rushed up and said the victim must have dropped some money because there were dollar bills on the ground. When the victim got out of his car to pick up the money, the first man's accomplice stole his bank bag.

### ***Prevention Methods***

If you carry a handbag when shopping, use one that has a zipper or snap-flap closure. More importantly; never let your bag out of your sight especially when it's in a shopping cart. If you turn away from your shopping cart for any reason, pick up your handbag and hold it in front of you. A handbag with a shoulder strap is a good choice, but never let the bag hang on the side behind an arm because a stealthy pickpocket can easily remove your wallet. An ideal method of preventing theft would be to carry cash, credit cards, and a driver's license in a front pants pocket, but that isn't practical for most women, because they have a habit of carrying a handbag.

In today's society, it's a shame that good citizens have to remain alert even in the most mundane of everyday situations, but crime is a reality and law-abiding citizens need to be aware at all times.

If you are victimized, call the police immediately and give a detailed description of the thief or thieves. Also, notify management if you are inside of a business. Besides dealing with the monetary loss to distraction thieves, as soon as possible, the victim should notify his or her bank and credit card companies. Then the victim has to deal with replacing his or her driver's license, Social Security card, insurance card, vehicle registration, and any other important piece of identification that was stolen.

Unfortunately, victims of distraction thieves have little chance of retrieving their stolen property, so the best way to keep from becoming a victim is to be ever-vigilant and on-guard. Be wary of strangers, no matter how "normal" they seem. Professional thieves prey on the kindness of others but a crime-wary citizen can still remain thoughtful and helpful to those who are truly in need without becoming a victim.

**Source URL (retrieved on 2013-06-24 08:44):** <http://www.miamisprings-fl.gov/police/distraction-thieves>